

Frank Lloyd Wright

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Frank Lloyd Wright, as a founder of the Prairie School of Architecture, has an international reputation. His creations include office buildings, public buildings, churches, museums, and residential homes. He is known for several building styles including Shingle style, Chicago style, Western Concrete Block, Usonian, and Prairie style. All of his styles apply the concept of organic architecture. This concept is apparent in his Prairie style houses, which are one of his greatest contributions to architecture in Illinois.

Frank Lloyd Wright was born in Richland Center, Wisconsin on June 8, 1867 and died April 9, 1959. He had three wives and seven children. He studied civil engineering at the University of Wisconsin and at the age of twenty, Wright traveled to Chicago and became an apprentice to a Chicago architect, Joseph Lyman Silsbee. Later he took a job with architect Louis Sullivan. When he was thirty-one years old, Wright designed approximately 800 buildings, but only 380 buildings were actually built. These buildings were built in thirty-six states and three of them were built in Japan. Over one hundred of these buildings are in Illinois. His long and horizontal residential designs are referred to as Prairie style homes. Several of these homes are still standing and can be seen in Illinois.

The Prairie style home was the result of Wright's focus on applying organic principles to residential architecture. This may be the result of the time he spent as a child on his family farm and his great love of the land. His residences were created and integrated into the specific geographic setting. He seemed to be concerned with the relationship of the building to the land, instead of the idea that the house is a box, and the interior of the home is that place where the dweller places things inside box. His basic idea was that a building should "grow organically from the land." Thus, he used nature to get ideas for the forms, texture, and color of each building. Wright termed this as "organic

architecture.” His concept of a residential building was that the inside and the outside of a residence should be united and not be separate entities.

Wright’s Prairie style homes looked like a horizontal plane, and they were built with natural materials. He gave his homes low-pitched rooflines and deep overhangs for shelter. A secluded entrance leading to a single door replaced porches and front steps that appeared in earlier architecture of homes. The walls of Wright’s houses contained uninterrupted windows, and rooms that were open to each other. Screens instead of walls defined the rooms. His architecture also included a large stone or brick fireplace located at the heart of the home. The horizontal bands of stained-glass windows that he used contained organic motifs. His homes also contained furniture, textiles, and lighting that were designed by him to carry out the organic architecture throughout the residence.

Wright experimented with his modern residential architecture on his own home and studio, which was located in Oak Park, Illinois. For privacy to his home he built a triangular form with a large gable that sheltered the entrance of the home. A low-walled terrace that allowed access to the reception hall by way of a covered portico established his studio’s privacy. A solid wall on the outside of the house was replaced with a band of windows that provided light and a sense of connectedness to the outdoors. Instead of seeing the side of a wall as a side of a box, he saw a wall as a mere enclosure of space that protected the interior from weather. Instead of blocking out the environment, he believed the barrier needed to act only as a screen that allowed light and air to be transmitted from the exterior to the interior. One historical architectural device that Wright kept in his architecture was the Palladian window on the front of the house.

Geometry was cleverly used in Wright’s architecture. Instead of having square rooms, he practiced breaking the square down. In his home, this experiment resulted in adding an octagonal bay to the north wall of his living room. His drafting room was two stories high and built as an octagon in a square. He also built an octagonal library in his home.

Recessed lighting was installed in the Wright dining room. It is thought that this was the first time recessed lighting was used in this country. Of course, today recessed lighting is used in many types of buildings. Wright also incorporated the most advanced technologies in his homes. He even had his own home wired for electricity before Oak Park had electricity. The Frank Lloyd Wright Home is designated as an example of Wright's architectural contribution to American culture.

Having practiced his organic architecture in his own home, he was ready to design homes with wide open living spaces that were reflective of the midwestern geography and expansive prairies that once covered Illinois. Thus, the Prairie style home emerged. There were more than 120 Prairie style homes designed by Frank Lloyd Wright and his associates. Two of his most impressive homes of this style are the Frederick C. Robie House in Chicago, Illinois, and the Dana-Thomas House, in Springfield, Illinois.



Dana Thomas House, Springfield. Courtesy of the Illinois State Historical Library, Mary Michals, Iconographer.

In 1902, Wright remodeled and extended the Dana Thomas House which he referred to as the “old-homestead.” After completion, this home included thirty-five rooms and took up an entire lot. Geometrically, the house had a cruciform plan with all the main common rooms on the first floor and the bedrooms on the second floor.

The Frederic C. Robie House, which was built in 1906, is probably the best known of all Wright's Prairie houses. It was referred to as steamship architecture because it was built on a narrow corner lot and had a streamlined design that looked like a ship. The attached garage on the ground level was a new feature for a house. The main level of the house had no walls or partitions in the common areas.

These two Prairie style homes have some similarities and some differences. The Dana-Thomas House already had a basement therefore, Wright turned that space into a library, offices, bowling alley and billiard room instead of living quarters for servants. In his residences, servants were taken out of the attic and the basement and placed in well-lighted living quarters. In the Robie House, no basement was excavated. The servants' quarters were located near the kitchen on the main floor. It should be noted that the Robie House is another structure designated as an example of Wright's architectural contribution to the American culture.

The entryway for each of these houses is different. The Dana-Thomas House's entryway is easily accessible from the street. The entrance for the Frederick C. Robie House is not even visible from the street. The entrance for the Frederick C. Robie House is not even visible from the street. The roofs are different styles but similar. The roofs of the Dana-Thomas House are low-pitched, gabled, and seem to flare out giving the appearance of a Japanese roof. Cantilevered roofs on the Robie House appear to defy gravity as they extend out about twenty feet from masonry supports. The rooflines of both homes are similar in that they are long, leaving the impression of the prairie.

The colors of the prairie, muted reds, tans and browns, appear outside and inside the homes. The houses are constructed of common brick, stone, and limestone. They both have massive fireplaces located in the central position of the home. Each house has balconies that overlook the grounds. Thus, the outside is brought inside. Predominant colors of the prairie appear inside the homes. The Dana-Thomas House has a color scheme of gold, olive, orange, and red. The Robie House's predominant color is gold. These colors are carried out in the furniture, fixtures, and carpets, which were designed

by Wright and his associates. The art glass in both of these houses not only contains the colors of the prairie, but the principal motifs in the windows are different patterns of an abstraction of natural plant forms from the prairie.

Frank Lloyd Wright's replacement of walls with windows that allowed the environment to be seen, his open floor plans, and his incorporation of the natural shape of the land to determine the design of the architecture are his major accomplishments. Even after Wright's death, his twentieth-century architectural innovations have a direct influence on the way we live today. The ranch style home that was built in the 1960s and 1970s incorporated Wright's innovations. Garages were attached to the home, open floor plans were utilized, windows extended the front of the home, and a fireplace was located in the center of the home. Frank Lloyd Wright's Prairie houses are lasting evidence in the history Illinois architecture. [From City of Chicago, Department of Planning and Development, "Frank Lloyd Wright," www.ci.chi.il.us (Aug. 25, 2003); CMG Worldwide, "Frank Lloyd Wright," www.cmgww.com (Aug. 25, 2003); Dana-Thomas Organization, "Frank Lloyd Wright," www.dana-thomas.org (Aug. 25, 2003); Frank Lloyd Wright commissions, "Prairie Styles," www.prairiestyles.com (Aug. 25, 2003); Geocities, "Frank Lloyd Wright Building Guide," www.geocities.com (Aug. 25, 2003); Thomas A. Heinz, *The Vision of Frank Lloyd Wright*, Edison, N.J.: Chartwell Books Inc., 2003; The Library of Congress, "Frank Lloyd Wright," www.americaslibrary.gov (Aug. 25, 2003); Diane Maddex, *Frank Lloyd Wright Inside and Out*, Minneapolis Institute of Arts, "Frank Lloyd Wright," www.artsmia.org (Aug. 25, 2003); Carl Nelson-Polias, "Frank Lloyd Wright Biography," www.lexised.com (Aug. 25, 2003); Robin Langley Sommer, *Frank Lloyd Wright*, Frank L. Wright Foundation, *Frank Lloyd Wright, an Autobiography*.]